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ABSTRACT

This paper examines children's responses to black and white illustrations in particular silhouettes. The study had two components; the first examined fifth graders' reactions to picture books using silhouette illustrations. The second part of the research analyzed students' responses when a dramatic context was used to view and respond to selected silhouette illustrations. Results from the two components include that children focused on visual details that were familiar and had personal significance; drew on context clues to cue visual response; used past literature experiences and knowledge to extend the narrative of the visual; and used experiences in the classroom and group interaction to shape their own response. The benefit of silhouette illustrations may be that they encourage viewers to use their own experiences and understanding to create meaning. (Contains 15 references.) (JLB)

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Children's Response to Silhouette Illustrations in Picture Books

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INTRODUCTION

Silhouettes and silhouette illustration have, from ancient times, been used to tell a story or record an important event. They may be seen in the artifacts of early civilizations, Chinese puppet theaters, Egyptian tomb decoration, and Grecian vases. The silhouette technique, in primitive and sophisticated forms, has continued in use to the present day.

When events such as marriage, birth, and family gatherings were recorded, silhouettes were often included as a part of significant documents. Portraits painted by artists or itinerant painters were the wealthy family's way of preserving likenesses for future generations, before the development of photography in the early nineteenth century. The middle class family could not, perhaps, afford a portrait, but they could elect to have their silhouettes made. Many artists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries painted silhouette portraits of individuals or entire families, for a fraction of the cost of a portrait in oil.

This technique was also admirably suited to book illustration; silhouettes of people, places, and things appeared as full page illustrations or as decorative motifs. They could carry the narrative of a story and were useful in identifying unique characteristics of a person or object. When color printing became fairly widespread, black and white silhouette illustrations were no longer so useful. And yet at intervals they reappear, sometimes as black and white and sometimes as colored shapes in a figure/ground aspect.

What is there about silhouettes that we find intriguing? Does a silhouette limit the viewer's response or can it move the imagination beyond what is there?

In the last few years (1990-1993) there seems to have been a renewed interest in the use of silhouettes for picture book illustration; the literature ranges from a description of the historical development of silhouette illustration (Cleaver, 1991) to discussions on introducing children to the concept of shadows (McDonald, 1993; Eberhart and Sabatino, 1991). In Paul Fleischman's *Shadow Play*, the illustrator, Eric Beddows, uses silhouette illustrations but also shows pictorially how silhouettes and shadows are formed. Readers see a shadow puppet theater first from the viewpoint of the audience, where the figures on the screen are seen as moving shadows and their silhouettes tell the story. Then the reader views the same scene from the actors' point of view and sees puppets on sticks being manipulated by people. One is the real image, one is the shadow or shade of the image. This shade or shadow is the silhouette.

Shape has been shown to be a primary organizer in children's response to visual stimuli (Hurt, 1991; Pettersson, 1989; Macbeth, 1974). While studies such as these offer valuable insights into children's perceptual responses, it cannot be assumed that because the silhouette technique is based on the power of shape, children will respond positively to silhouette illustrations. Other considerations, such as the relationship of figure to ground and the limitation of black and white, may influence children's responses.

Many research studies in the 1970's indicated that children prefer color illustrations to black and white, but often the pictures the children were examining were presented out of context, using some pictures from a book but not the picture book as a whole. It has been suggested that research carried out under laboratory conditions, with limited variables, and often taking pictures out of context, is grounded in "adult paradigms of how children operate" (Kiefer, 1982, p. 48).

Do children always prefer color illustrations to black and white illustrations? In Hurt's survey of preference studies (1991), he concluded that "As a general rule, the amount of realism displayed and the use of color are picture aspects that produce preferences common to all children" (p.169). His analysis of the studies was done to provide library media specialists with a guide for selecting picture books. One of his four considerations was "Use of Color," about which he stated, "All children prefer realistically colored pictures to black-and-white" (p.171). Following such a selection guideline would omit many wonderful books, from Tenniel's illustrations of *Alice in Wonderland*, to Shepard's *Winnie the Pooh*, to Macaulay's *Black and White*.

THE STUDY

It is our contention that children can appreciate black and white illustrations, particularly silhouettes, when they are properly introduced. Children can understand what is being represented when they are given the opportunity to examine the book and formulate their responses. To test this hypothesis, we designed our study to introduce some fifth grade children to the concepts of light and dark, shadows, and silhouettes, and then to share some picture books in which these techniques are used. We were interested in children's free responses to the silhouette illustration rather than posing questions or tasks which depended on selection. We didn't want to ask them to make either/or choices, such as choosing pictures with color or pictures in black and white.

To record and interpret children's responses to pictures, we adapted structures suggested by the writings on reader response of Hickman (1992), Stewig (1992), and Edwards (1991). Children were not asked directive questions but rather were engaged in discussions about what they felt about the pictures or what the artist was trying to say. They reflected on the pictures, on the artistic style, on whether the picture added anything to the story which the words did not tell. They connected to the pictures through their musings and conversations. As they did this, they were constructing their own meanings, a process which relies on the experiences they bring to the book.

Stewig (1992) suggests that children learn to read a picture much as they learn to read text. "They can be helped to examine the entire book as a context for meaning, the individual pictures, and parts of pictures, in a process parallel to reading comprehension" (p. 21). Further, they can be involved "in determining whether the artist is explaining, extending/ expanding, or adding to word text through visuals" (Stewig, pp. 21-22).

Our study was designed to encourage the fifth graders to explain and describe, to extend and expand, and to add to the picture books they examined. We provided opportunities for visual

as well as oral response, and opportunities for children to express themselves in movement, motion, and drawing.

PICTURE BOOKS

Individual Response

Before we took our ideas to the fifth grade classrooms, we decided to present three books with silhouette illustrations to one seven-year-old child, Tricia. We hoped she would help us learn more about a child's perspective on silhouettes. Two of the books, *Cinderella* by Jan Pienkowski, and *In Shadowland* by Anno (a story which is told in two settings, a place with color and light and a place where shadows go in the winter), have illustrations using both silhouette images and color. *The Enchanted Caribou* by Elizabeth Cleaver uses only black and white illustrations in a story about a girl who is turned into a caribou and is transformed back into a girl by the one she loves.

One of the researchers worked with Tricia reading along with her and asking her questions when the opportune times arose. Tricia was already familiar with the concept of shadows, she said, but did not know the word "silhouette." When asked how shadows are made, she said, "They're people or anything and the sun... or you can outline something with your hands and put a flashlight on it."

Responses to Cinderella

Before reading the words in each story, Tricia was asked to look at the pictures page by page. She then described the story in her own words. Tricia had no trouble distinguishing the figures in *Cinderella*. She already knew the story and described the illustrations with the familiar storyline in mind. When looking at the first page of the story, she demonstrated her knowledge of folktale tradition and said, "They are saying like 'Once upon a time' or something like that." Tricia was able to distinguish the characters whom she knew so well. Cleaver suggests, "since there are usually no visual cues in its interior, the silhouette must capture the essential attributes of the person, object, or motion being pictured" (1991, p. 416). Tricia saw those attributes of the characters in *Cinderella* and knew the stepmother "because she has warts." She recognized Cinderella because she "looks delicate."

Cleaver also said, "Shape and the relationship of figure to ground provide a representation of reality which is interpreted and fitted into the viewer's own knowledge and experience" (1991, p. 415). Pienkowski's *Cinderella* apparently did not quite match Tricia's prior knowledge of *Cinderella*. When Tricia was describing what she saw in the silhouettes and was telling the story by looking only at the illustrations, she hesitated at the page of lizards. In Pienkowski's retelling of the tale, the lizards turn into footmen for the pumpkin coach. Tricia knew about the mice in *Cinderella*, but in her version (Disney's version), no lizards were in the story. She looked, paused briefly, and said, "This is nothing, just a bunch of lizards," and quickly went on to the next page.

Responses to The Enchanted Caribou

Tricia was able to describe fairly accurately the storyline of *The Enchanted Caribou* before reading the story, but was unsuccessful in using her past experience to place the story in its appropriate setting. When asked what she was thinking about or looking for when she was going through the book, Tricia said, "I was thinking there are not many things in these pictures, and they are black and white." She wanted more detail and "clouds." Tricia felt these pictures were too "plain." She needed more information to help her set the scene. The story setting, the Arctic, was not in her repertoire of stories or experiences. She had not developed a schema in which she could place *The Enchanted Caribou*.

Shared Responses

Responses to In Shadowland

In Shadowland was presented to both Tricia and the group of fifth graders chosen for this study. This book uses color and silhouette to represent two kingdoms. Colored illustrations and silhouette illustrations are juxtaposed on facing pages. Occasionally colored images are placed within a silhouette page.

Interestingly, Tricia and the fifth graders seemed to treat this story as a mystery, as if there was hidden information within the pictures. All of the children studied the pictures at length. They noticed the shadows and silhouettes on both the colored and the silhouette pages. All were intrigued by the details. Many of Tricia's comments were similar to the fifth graders' comments about the pictures.

The clue in one particular silhouette illustration, a watchtower, interested all the children. On the tower is a weathervane, a flag sporting an eye design, and other detailed objects in silhouette. Also on top of the tower a watchman is presented in color illustration. Tricia examined the illustration and said, "The eyes on the flag are the strangest thing." She did not know why the eyes were on the flag until she read the story and the word "watchman." She then excitedly explained the reason for the eyes. The sophisticated fifth graders, however, knew immediately, only from examining the picture, why the flag had eyes. At seven years old, Tricia had not had as much experience with symbolism as the fifth graders.

Both Tricia and the fifth graders felt that it took time to study the illustrations. When asked if it was easy to know what you were looking at, one fifth grader said, "No, because there's no depth. It's a problem because you can't use color to help." Tricia said, "In Shadowland [the silhouettes] are harder to tell because they are all attached together."

Still, *In Shadowland* was a popular book with both Tricia and the fifth graders. The children examined the pictures and explained what they saw. All children commented on the silhouettes where color is added. When reflecting on all the illustrations in the book, Tricia explained, "I like that the monkey turned red. The monkey stands out more." This comment referred to the silhouette page where a red silhouette of a monkey is presented on a full page of black silhouette images.

When asked how they liked the way the story was presented, one fifth grader said, "You can look at the pictures more to decide what's in the story." Another student concluded, "The story itself wasn't so hot, but it got interesting with the pictures."

This experience with picture books introduced these children to the art form of silhouette, encouraged them to think about what they saw in the picture books and challenged them to draw their own conclusions from what they already knew and from what they saw. As one fifth grader said, "There's a lot in these pictures."

As a culminating activity with the fifth graders, students made their own silhouettes representing a part of any story which they particularly liked. They could draw, using pen and ink, or they could tear or cut out shapes from black paper to create their own silhouette images. Some children chose to illustrate fairy tales (Figure 1), one chose an event from a chapter book (Figure 3), and another child cut and pasted his version of *Where's Spot?* by Eric Hill (Figure 2). Each child displayed his or her silhouette while the other children guessed what story was being represented. Again, the children were using their prior knowledge (of books) and the relationship of figure to ground to determine the intended story. Allowing the children to make a visual response to the silhouette illustrations they examined seemed

to free their imagination and increase their understanding of this artistic technique.

DRAMATICS

Building Response Through "Process Drama" Activities

The main objective of this aspect of our research was to analyze children's responses when a dramatic context was used to view and actively respond to selected silhouette illustrations. How would the dramatic context and teacher's actions determine what they read in the illustrations? We planned to explore how the artist's message embedded in the illustration shaped the children's emerging dramatic story. Would the visuals they recreated explain what they saw? Would their verbal, written, and visual drama activities in response to the illustrations move them to expand/extend and create new meaning?

The lesson was conducted in an Arts Impact School which emphasizes the visual arts, process or educational drama, music and dance as important areas of study. In this school the arts are used as powerful vehicles to explore many areas of the curriculum. The activity was done in a fifth grade classroom and lasted almost two hours. The purpose of the activity was to analyze the factors that influenced the children's response to the silhouette illustrations used in the activity. The two illustrations the drama teacher used were by Arthur Rackham and appear in the book *The Sleeping Beauty* (Evans, 1920, pp. 34-35, 64-65).

Creating the Context

The drama teacher began the lesson by narrating that it was a time long ago. She then assumed the role of a medieval cloth merchant and told the children, whom she addressed as villagers, that she had just had a very strange encounter. She said, "I went to the castle to sell my beautiful cloth but the gates of the palace were locked. No one would let me inside." She then told the children that as she was leaving a mysterious figure appeared and handed her two strange pictures. She continued, "Let me show them to you."

At this point she presented the first Rackham illustration for the children to look at. It was a two-page silhouette from *The Sleeping Beauty* (1920) illustrating the moment the uninvited fairy curses the baby princess. The children did not know these illustrations were from this book and had to rely on their ability to read the illustration in order to make sense of what they saw.

When the drama teacher asked, "What do you see here? Tell me what you think," they seemed to be immediately drawn into a process of reading the picture to discover what it meant both on a descriptive as well as a narrative level. They made comments such as, "I think one of the villagers is giving the king and queen something." Another child said, "One of them is accusing someone." They mentioned various people in the illustrations as they speculated on the meaning of the picture. Some of the characters they identified were an accuser (evil fairy), a king, a queen, a joker (the page), and a child (the baby princess).

The teacher guided their reading of the illustrations by asking questions that encouraged the children to articulate the details that led to their visual conclusions. For example, after someone mentioned the king and queen she asked, "How can you tell it is even the king and queen? It is so baffling to me!"

When a student said, "It looks like someone has fainted on the queen's lap," the teacher mused that this was possible but that she wasn't sure, and held the picture out for the class to see. This motivated others in the group to look again more closely, and a girl said, "It's a child." Several students expressed agreement and some commented, "I see a hand," or "Maybe a villager is saying that it is her baby." One

child, drawing on previous literature experiences, said, "Maybe it's like Rumpelstiltskin and the baby."

At this point the children were actively involved in creating their own narrative based on their reading of the illustration. They were motivated to look and figure out what this illustration meant, and at this point someone asked to see the second illustration. When the teacher showed them this picture the children leaned closer and their "ahs" and "oohs" were audible. It was as if this new picture both confirmed what they were thinking and opened up new dramatic possibilities.

They excitedly speculated on how these new visual images fit into the dramatic narrative they were creating. The images of various people in the castle all busily going about daily activities caused some to isolate details in the illustration and speculate on what these things might mean, such as the spinning wheel which once again some connected to the fairy tale *Rumpelstiltskin.*

Another child was drawn to the part of the whole picture that showed the king and queen and said, "I see the king and queen fighting." Others responded to the picture and story as a whole. One of these students speculated that all of the activity in the picture could mean that the king and queen had been robbed. Still another said, "It might be the day the baby will be married."

The drama teacher once again focused the students' attention and asked, "How can we find out for sure what is really going on?" At this point the dramatic context, illustrations, and role-play began to mesh. Through a series of drama activities the students would explain and respond to these ideas and images, expand/ extend these images and create new ideas and images in order to create and respond to "their" story.

Explaining

In role as the villagers they decided to sneak into the castle and find out what was really going on. Using drama they were instructed to physically create what they thought was happening in the castle. Each child did this by first assuming the role of a person in the illustrations. Then the children divided into four groups and planned tableaux or still pictures. Most of the groups' tableaux reproduced what they had observed in the illustrations as if physically explaining what they had seen.

Three groups recreated the scene in the throne room from the first illustration. The characters they included were the king, queen, evil fairy, baby, page, and a person hiding behind the wall, all prominent characters in the illustration. The fourth group drew their scene from the second illustration and showed a tableau of the king and queen fighting.

While the groups were looking at the tableaux, the teacher invited the children to add their thoughts aloud as the characters. Once again their comments revealed how the images they had seen and were now recreating drew on fairy tale motifs. In the first group the accuser (the children's label for the finger pointing evil fairy) in reference to the story of *Rumpelstiltskin* said, "And at the age of sixteen she will be mine." Another student, also role-playing this character, said, "At the age of sixteen she will prick her finger on the spinning wheel and die forever. Ha! Ha! Ha!," actually referring to *Sleeping Beauty* , the tale the illustrations had been created for. The group which showed the king and queen fighting posed the question, "I wonder why the king treats her that way?"

Extending/ Expanding

Almost as if in response to the above dialogue the last group, which had also recreated the throne room scene, spoke thoughts that added new information to the story the children

were creating. Two figures hiding behind the wall said, "Oh, my goodness, I can't believe the queen stole a baby."

The second phase of this activity helped the students expand on these ideas further. They were told that they would show their tableaux from behind a paper screen. When the teacher asked the students what they would see behind the screen they responded, "Shadows." She then invited them to expand on the ideas presented earlier by saying, "And the shadows might not be saying the same thing as the real people. It's up to you to decide what your shadow has to do with your real self."

The children enjoyed seeing their own reflections on the paper screen, and when a light projected the shadows it became even more obvious how they were mirroring the illustrations they had seen. The shadows they projected looked surprisingly like the silhouette illustrations. They continued to extend their narrative at this point adding more and more detail. Again they showed the influence of folk literature. One girl role-playing the queen repeated details from the Rumpelstiltskin story. She said, "You've stolen my bracelet, my necklace and my ring. You cannot have my baby."

Creating New Meaning

Throughout the drama, the children did a variety of activities in order to more fully develop their story as well as some of its more abstract and symbolic themes. One of these themes was the relationship between the shadow and the real person. In order to explore this the children role-played a shadow or a real person and in pairs interviewed each other to find out something they did not know before (for instance, the king's shadow talked with the real king). Some children added to the story while others produced more abstract responses such as, "I have a real mean side" and "I turn to my shadow for strength."

The last series of activities began when the students were asked to write, in role, from the perspective of someone in the story. Some chose to write as people outside the castle who were trying to figure out the mystery. Others wrote as real people in the castle while still others wrote as shadows. These writings revealed many levels of response which added new information to the emerging story. Two students wrote:

I feel dark and gloomy,
like the wind's shadow.
But I am my own shadow,
of daylight.

and

It's dark, I'm afraid.
No light, I'm afraid.
The truth not spoken.
No light, I'm afraid.
I'm not understood by others.
I'm not understood by me.

These students not only expanded and extended ideas explored in the drama activities but drew on and expanded the theme of light and dark which was a core visual element in the silhouette illustrations.

Reflecting on the Drama

When the drama was over the teacher asked the students what they felt the theme of their story was. Many said it was about the baby. Other responses included greed, jealousy, and revenge. One boy said, "Well I think it was mostly about how people let out their innermost feeling and inner ways of dealing with wickedness." Each of the children had taken their own meaning from the story. They were making sense of it by using their previous knowledge and experiences, e.g., fairy tales as well as their drama activities. Their responses had explained the illustrations, e.g., "It's a queen, I see the crown." They had extended/expanded the illustrations and story, e.g., "You've stolen my bracelet, my necklace and my ring. You cannot have my baby." Finally,

they created new meaning both visually through tableaux and narratively through oral language and writing, e.g., "I turn to my shadow for strength."

Conclusion

In this research the children's response to illustration using drama was a complex and interconnected process combining the illustrations and the dramatic medium. Let's look first to the art itself, which began with Rackham's skill to communicate images and relationships as well as focus the visual attention of the viewer. For example, the central focus of the first picture which shows the evil fairy pointing at the baby also became the central focus of the drama. It was intensified by the medium of the silhouette itself with its sharp contrast of the black and white and emphasis on shape. These distinctive features captured the children's attention. It is not surprising then that the characters the illustrator focused on or highlighted were the same characters the children chose to act out their drama.

The lack of details in the silhouettes gave the children ample room to extend/expand by drawing on details from their own personal experience and literature backgrounds. One student commented that he liked the silhouette illustrations because, "These make you think more. It's like the shadow. The black and white are more mysterious." For some, then, the lack of details aided rather than limited their response. In addition, as discussed earlier, the silhouette also functioned symbolically, highlighting the main themes of good vs. evil and light vs. dark.

The second factor that influenced the children's response was the dramatic medium itself. Four areas of this medium were most relevant in this research:

- First, the initial dramatic context. The key question, "What is going on in the castle and what do these pictures mean?" motivated the children to look carefully and with purpose at the illustrations presented.

- Second, the nature of the dramatic medium to combine and reflect on visual as well as language modes of communication.

- Third, the teacher's actions throughout the drama which supported and extended the children's response. Throughout the drama the teacher worked to focus their attention, asked questions that called for response, and structured activities that pushed their response to deeper levels.

- Fourth, the social nature of the medium. Drama is a group activity, consequently, the children were influenced by each other's ideas as they responded in the drama. Narratives were built on narratives and visual interpretations influenced other visual responses. The response through drama became a form of visual and oral storytelling, a continuous and interconnected process.

The observations made in this classroom by one of the researchers led to the speculation that silhouette illustration can be a powerful visual stimulus to creative thinking and rich response. When children are motivated to actively respond to illustrations in this way they develop important visual and conventional literacy skills. They use both visuals and language to create story. This story, according to Barton and Booth (1990), "is a continuous process. We borrow from others to see how our story fits theirs, then we remold it, add to it, alter it, tell it anew, always exploring fresh possibilities" (p. 14).

FINAL ANALYSIS

Of course, studies as limited as the two we conducted cannot hope to explain all there is to know about children's response to silhouette illustration. However, both studies noted several recurring patterns concerning children's response. We found that children:

- focused on visual details that were familiar and had personal significance;
- drew on context clues to cue visual response;
- used past literature experiences and knowledge to extend the narrative of the visual;
- used experiences in the classroom and group interaction to shape their own response.

In conclusion, silhouette illustrations present learners with many challenges as the learners make meaning, by drawing on numerous personal and group constructs. This process can be supported in a school setting in several ways. First, by giving children a variety of opportunities to view and muse over silhouette illustrations; second, by supporting their reading of these visuals through teacher actions such as questioning, focusing of their attention, and structuring learning activities.

Finally, an often overlooked factor is to appreciate as teachers the theory that children may benefit from learning experiences that contain elements of ambiguity. In our research one student commented, "Colored pictures really tell the story." Thus the benefit of silhouette illustration may be the challenge silhouettes present viewers as they are called upon to fill in the missing details in the illustrations from their own experiences and emerging understanding and to create and recreate stories of their own.

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Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3